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Corrupt Mexican officials foil anti-drug efforts, Senate told

By Roger Fontaine
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U.S. Customs chief William von Raab accused the Mexican governor of Sonora yesterday of owning four ranches where opium and marijuana are grown for export to the United States.

"We believe these ranches are currently and occasionally guarded by the federal judiciary police and the Mexican army," he said at a Senate hearing.

It was the first time that a top official of the Reagan administration publicly linked an elected Mexican governor to the drug trade. The information apparently was classified prior to yesterday's disclosure before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs.

Mr. von Raab said American agents have identified 760 areas of cross-border penetration, 132 drug warehouses north and south of the border, and 472 clandestine air strips used in the drug traffic. He said Colombian cocaine smugglers were also using Mexico because of the U.S. crackdown on trafficking in southern Florida.

Mexico, he said, has become the

No. 1 source of heroin and marijuana coming into the United States and serves as a conduit for 30 percent of the cocaine coming in from Colombia.

Mr. von Raab said the flow of drugs from Mexico is facilitated by "massive" corruption among Mexican officials, especially in police agencies. He said Mexico's military and police have protected "convoys" of drugs headed for the U.S. border.

Attempts to elicit cooperation from Mexican officials to stem the drug trade have resulted in only a "flutter of assistance," he said. Asked to be more specific, Mr. von Raab confessed, "We have had no success whatsoever in getting that kind of cooperation."

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, agreed that the Mexican police were corrupt but distanced himself from the customs chief's charges of military involvement in the illicit drug trade. He also denied that corruption had reached the highest levels of Mexican government — specifically President Miguel de la Madrid and his Cabinet — and maintained that cooperation between top U.S. and Mexican officials was good.

In the course of the hearing, presided over by Republican Sen. Jesse Helms from North Carolina, veiled allusions were made to a top Mexican official's relative and his involvement in the drug traffic. Officials refused to comment in public on the issue, but congressional

sources said it was raised during a closed hearing on Monday by agents of the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Customs Service and the Drug Enforcement agency.

Mr. Abrams warned that the Mexican president's power was limited.

"President de la Madrid does not have the ability that President Reagan does because behind some of the buttons that you would want to push from the presidential palace in Mexico City you will find corruption — the kind of people who do not want to carry out those orders," Mr. Abrams said.

"The amount of money is fantastic," said Mr. Abrams. "The ability to corrupt officials is therefore fantastic."

"We need to give [Mexico's] leaders a sense of how dangerous this is to the future of U.S.-Mexican relations. They have got to get organized to stop this before it's too late, and it can get to be too late."

Mr. von Raab said the U.S. effort to stop the flow of drugs "is doomed to failure" without the full cooperation of the Mexican government, but added that it is impossible to achieve such cooperation because "corruption is so pervasive" one has to assume every Mexican official is corrupt unless proven otherwise.

"There is an ingrained corruption in the Mexican law enforcement establishment," Mr. von Raab said. "Until it is corrected, we will never solve the problem."

Mr. Helms, in opening the hearings, said they were held despite objections from the Mexican government.